Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Review of *Translating Blackness: Latinx Colonialities in Global Perspective* by Lorgia García Peña (Duke University Press)

by Shreya Parikh | Book Reviews, Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023)

ABSTRACT In *Translating Blackness*, Lorgia García Peña offers a transnational conceptualization of Black Latinidad. Framing Black Latinidad as an epistemology, García Peña traces its historical and contemporary formations through the lives and the work of historical Black Latinx intellectuals as well as contemporary Black and Black Latinx individuals in the Carribean, Italy, and the United States. García Peña approaches Black Latinidad as produced through *vaivén*—coming and going across physical and symbolic borders of nation-state and migrant-citizen categories that characterizes the sociological position of Black Latinx individuals.

KEYWORDS Blackness, Latinx, colonialism, migration, race

Translating Blackness: Latinx Colonialities in Global Perspective. By Lorgia García Peña. Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2022, 336 pp. (paperback). ISBN 978-1-4780-1866-7. US List: $27.95.

The summer of 2020 witnessed Black Lives Matter demonstrations in many parts of the Global South, where the question of anti-Black racism is assumed to not be relevant. Signs and slogans that protestors against the murder of George Floyd had used in the streets of the United States showed up in countries like Cuba, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Tunisia, which are assumed to be homogeneously Latinx, Black, or Arab. In these Global South countries, these protests revived a

perplexing question among activists and academics: what are the implications of engaging US categories and symbols of Blackness in Global South contexts? Lorgia García Peña's *Translating Blackness* seeks to respond to this conundrum. By theorizing Black Latinidad as "an epistemology—a way of understanding and producing knowledge from the site of unbelonging," García Peña seeks to go beyond its conceptualization as an identity. García Peña builds her conceptualization of Black Latinidad using the lives and the works of contemporary and historical Black Latinx public figures as well as ordinary individuals primarily from Dominican Republic, Italy, and the US; together, the lives of these individuals allow for a multifaceted conceptualization of Black Latinidad that account for differences in experiences as well as trajectories along gender, socio-economic class, and migrant-versus-citizen lines.

García Peña argues that Black Latinidad has been constructed in a transnational context. To overcome the rigidity of nation-state borders that constrain academic studies on Blackness, García Peña approaches Black Latinidad as produced through *vaivén*—coming and going across physical and symbolic borders of nation-state and migrant-citizen categories that characterizes the sociological position of Black Latinx individuals. Primary and secondary-source materials that support García Peña's arguments include archival material like photographs, interviews, and literary texts by Black Latinx figures like Arthur Schomburg and Gregorio Luperón, as well as oral histories and interviews with Black Latinxs in the US, the Hispanic Caribbean, and Italy.

The book is divided into two parts. Part one, titled "On Being Black and Citizen: Latinx Colonial Vaivenes," traces the genealogy of the construction of Black and Latinx as non-overlapping identities which lie in opposition to each other. In Chapter one titled "A full stature of humanity," García Peña describes the tensions rooted in desires for national belonging that pushed US Black individuals to support colonizing nation-state projects while knowing that nation-states are themselves founded on violent exclusion. Through a critical reading of the life and

the work of abolitionist Frederick Douglass, García Peña shows that many US Black intellectuals (including Douglass) saw post-Civil-War integration into US's colonial expansionist projects as a form of integration into US citizenship. Colonization came to be seen as a path to equality and citizenship for Black people in the US, culminating in projects like the colonial formation of Liberia. Douglass supported the US project of annexing the Dominican Republic, with the belief that it could become a site of US Black emigration and more egalitarian (Black) citizenship.

García Peña describes the tensions in ideologies adopted by Black abolitionists like Douglass: Like white politicians, Douglass justified the colonization of "Latin" people with their "inferiority" and "weakness" at self-governance; at the same time, Douglass fought ideas of scientific racism that justified enslavement of Black people in the US (54). This political construction of Latinidad as different and inferior from (US) Blackness led to the construction of Blackness and Latinidad as separate (and antonymous) identities. In chapter two, titled "Arthur Schomburg's Haiti," García Peña delves into the conceptualization of Black Latinidad that questioned this imposed separation and hierarchization of Black and Latinx identities by studying the life and the work of Black Puerto Rican scholar Arthur Schomburg who was foundational in shaping Black Latinx intellectualism.

Part two of the book, titled "Black feminist contradictions in Latinx diasporas," theorizes Black Latinidad through the contemporary experiences and trajectories of Black migrant women. In chapter three, titled "Against Death," García Peña uses qualitative research carried over seven years with women-led organizations in Italy, New York, and the Dominican Republic to argue that many Black-Latina/x individuals are forced to migrate in order to escape "physical, political, and social death" (121); for example, a significant number of Dominican women migrate to Italy, either as sex or domestic workers, to escape poverty. But the "diaspora is not always less violent than home; it is simply a larger arena from which to fight

against the common enemy . . . [and] from which to possess a new form of knowledge in transnational community" (144).

In chapter four, titled "The Afterlife of Colonial Gender Violence," García Peña shows that Dominican women—like migrant women from Eritrea and Somalia (both ex-colonies of Italy)—witness marginalization along racial and gender lines in Italy and that this marginalization traces its genealogy in historical colonial projects undertaken by the Italian state. Yet, by "mystifying colonialism, Italy has escaped the kind of anti-colonial critique that proliferates in US, French, and British academies," and denied claims pointing to the existence of state-racism (156). In chapter five, titled "Second generation interruptions," García Peña describes how second-generation Black Latinx challenge the barriers linked to their inherited marginalization in Italy. Black and Brown migrant women and their children witness the impossibility of becoming full (social) citizens in Italy because national belonging (*italianità*) is rooted in ideas of white supremacy and racial purity. Upon gaining legal citizenship in Global North, Black and Brown migrants gain the privilege of cross-national mobility and access to state services and institutions. At the same time, legal citizenship does not guarantee belonging; many Black migrants and their descendants find themselves rejected from social citizenship in their new homes in Global North as well as in their countries of origin.

In the conclusion, García Peña reflects on the dual position occupied by US theorization of Blackness at the global level; she notes that "US history and radical struggles for freedom have afforded many people a lingua franca with which to articulate and translate blackness," while, at the same time, this articulation is made possible "in part because of US colonialism and cultural dominance around the world" (237). Instead of doing away with this US-centric theorization, García Peña calls for the theorization of Blackness in and through "new places and lesser-studied epistemologies and histories that decenter hegemonic blackness while being in dialogue with the important legacies of US

Black radical traditions" (238). In addition, García Peña also reminds readers that Global North states are not the only ones perpetuating violence linked to colonialism and its afterlives; in Global South states like Chile, the afterlives of colonial social structures perpetuate the marginalization of Black populations.

Translating Blackness stands out for its inclusion of Italy as a site of production and contestation of Black Latinidad; García Peña pushes the reader to consider sites that lie outside the common migratory routes of Black Latinx individuals. Bringing together the fields of Black and Latinx studies, García Peña, an ethnic studies scholar from Dominican Republic, offers a transnational conceptualization of Black Latinidad that goes beyond its academic theorization in the U.S. context.

Author Information

Shreya Parikh

Shreya Parikh is a dual PhD candidate in political sociology at CERI-Sciences Po Paris and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and a Beyond Borders PhD Fellow (2022–24) at Zeit-Stiftung. She is also an affiliated researcher at Institut de Recherche sur le Maghreb Contemporain (IRMC) in Tunis. Her dissertation research focuses on the constructions and contestations of race and racialization in Tunisia through a focus on the study of racialization of Black Tunisians and Sub-Saharan migrants. Parikh grew up in Ahmedabad in India, and undertook her previous studies at Sciences Po Paris and the American University of Beirut. She is interested in the study of race, borders, migration, and citizenship in the North Africa region and its diaspora.

View all of Shreya Parikh's articles.

Article details

Shreya Parikh, "Review of *Translating Blackness: Latinx Colonialities in Global Perspective* by Lorgia García Peña (Duke University Press)," *Lateral* 12.2 (2023).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.2.XX

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053